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Observing America:

What Mass-Observation Reveals about British Views of the United States

Clive Webb

Abstract

Since its foundation in 1937, the social research organisation Mass-Observation has systematically documented the opinions of a British public experiencing profound societal change. This includes the most extensive data available on grassroots attitudes towards the United States, from the outbreak of the Second World to the final phase of the Cold War. Most of the scholarship on Anglo-American relations focuses on the political and diplomatic elites of Britain and the United States. The extension to which their interaction reflected and reinforced public opinion is seldom considered. This article uses the Mass Observation archive to situate elite interaction within the broader context of public opinion. In so doing, it assesses the extent to which British political leaders have in their dealings with the United States represented the views of the electorate they serve.

Keywords Mass-Observation; Anglo-American Special Relationship; anti-Americanism; Franklin D. Roosevelt; Ronald Reagan

On 5 March 1946, Winston Churchill delivered his most important speech following the end of his wartime premiership. Speaking in Fulton, Missouri, the former prime minister exhorted the American people to recognise that their ‘special relationship’ with Britain was the surest

means to resist the encroachment of Soviet influence that had already led to the descent of an ‘iron curtain’ across Europe.¹

In the decades since, many nations have claimed to benefit from ‘special relations’ with one another. Britain and the United States nonetheless use the definitive article to demonstrate that theirs is the special relationship *ne plus ultra*. More than a sharing of common strategic interests, exponents claim that the two nations have a uniquely close and innate affinity. As Donald Trump proclaimed when British prime minister Theresa May symbolically became the first foreign leader to meet the newly inaugurated American president in January 2017, ‘Today the US renews our deep bond with Britain—military, financial, culture [sic] and political.’²

There is an enormous literature on Anglo-American relations.³ Scholars have debated the rhetorical claims made for the special relationship, some seeing it as exceptional but others concluding that ties between Britain and the United States are determined by pragmatic interest. Whether they take a sentimental or realist approach, these authors have essentially based their analyses on elite interaction. One result of this is a tendency to use the partnership between the respective leaders of Britain and the United States to periodise the

¹ For more on the speech, see Alan P. Dobson and Steve Marsh, eds, *Churchill and the Anglo-American Special Relationship* (London: Routledge, 2016).

² ‘President Trump and Prime Minister May’s Opening Remarks’, January 27, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/president-trump-prime-minister-mays-opening-remarks/>.

³ Core texts include Alan Dobson, *Anglo-American Relations in the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1995); John Dumbrell, *A Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations in the Cold War and After* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 2001); Robert Hathaway, *Great Britain and the United States: Special Relations since World War II* (Boston: Twayne, 1990); and Wm. Roger Louis and Hedley Bull, eds, *The Special Relationship: Anglo-American Relations since 1945* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1986).

history of Anglo-American relations. Scholars see transatlantic ties as being strongest when there was close and personal collaboration between the US president and the British prime minister, as with John F. Kennedy and Harold Macmillan or Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher, and at their weakest when the two politicians were not of the same mind, for instance, Richard Nixon and Edward Heath.

To what extent the ebb and flow of elite interaction has mapped onto public opinion on either side of the Atlantic is, however, seldom considered. The fraternity between George W. Bush and Tony Blair provides a cautionary example. In 2003, the prime minister received more than a dozen standing ovations after an address to Congress in which he defended the invasion of Iraq while back in his home country anti-war demonstrators took to the streets for the largest political protest in British history.⁴

These contrasting responses provide another perspective on the debate about the common cultural and historical identities that supposedly underpin the special relationship. Shifting focus away from the loci of political and economic power towards grassroots public opinion provides a means to determine whether there is any substance to rhetoric about the shared identity that unites Britain and the United States. According to the historian Akira Iriye, it is only possible to gain a holistic understanding of the dynamic between nations by looking not only at issues relating to trade and security but also the core values that they

⁴ Steve Marsh and John Baylis, 'The Anglo-American "Special Relationship": The Lazarus of International Relations,' *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 17, no. 1 (April 2006): 181, 188.

share. It is these 'structures of meaning' that account for the strength and endurance of transnational ties.⁵

Given the claims made about it, this cultural interpretation of international relations seems especially salient for the 'special relationship'. This article addresses the 'cultural turn' in diplomatic history through use of an archival collection overlooked by historians of Anglo-American relations. The Mass-Observation Archive includes thousands of pages of material documenting British public opinion on an enormous array of subjects, including the United States. In broadening the focus from elite personalities and politics to everyday people, the archive provides an alternative perspective on the history of Anglo-American relations. It provides answers to some fundamental questions. Has the 'special relationship' ever been more than an elite project based on political expediency and mutual self-interest? What have Britons really thought of Americans as a people and the United States as a polity? In having asked participants about their 'feelings' towards the United States, Mass-Observation allows us to interrogate not only the diplomatic dynamics of Anglo-American relations, but also the emotional politics of Britain's transference of world leadership to the United States. Since respondents included both men and women, this also uniquely allows us to determine whether attitudes towards the United States were gendered. Unfortunately, while Mass-Observation disclosed the age, gender and occupational status of respondents, it did not reveal their ethnicity, arguably less of an issue in the first phase than following its relaunch in the 1980s.

Using the Archive

⁵ Akira Iriye, 'Culture,' *Journal of American History* 77, no. 1 (June 1990): 99-107. The phrase 'structures of meaning' owes much to what the cultural critic Raymond Williams similarly described as 'structure of feeling'. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), 128-35.

Mass-Observation was a social research organisation established in 1937 to document the actions and opinions of the British public. It utilised untrained volunteer observers who recorded their remarks in diaries or in answers to directives on specific subjects, both of which sources were then compiled in file reports.⁶ Historians have principally used Mass-Observation to recover the lived experience of everyday people in a British society undergoing transformational change. Yet that process had not only a domestic but also an international impact. Mass-Observation provides particularly revealing insight into the response of ordinary Britons to the decline of their nation's global power and prestige and rise of a new world order dominated by the competing superpowers of the United States and Soviet Union.

Before assessing its actual content it is important to provide an evaluation of the methodological strengths and weaknesses of the archive. First, there is the issue of how representative the participants were of the broader public. As with any volunteer study, Mass-Observation was susceptible to self-selection bias. Contributors were not only predominantly members of the upper working class and middle class but also people with the interest and opportunity to participate, meaning that they were not entirely typical of 'the man in the street', as was its stated purpose.⁷ Its national panel of observers also skewed further to the left politically than the larger population.⁸ Notwithstanding this potential political bias, Nick Hubble notes in his study of Mass-Observation that its research antagonised critics on both

⁶ For further background, see James Hinton, *The Mass Observers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

⁷ Tom Harrisson, 'British Opinion Toward a New Synthesis,' *Public Opinion Quarterly* 11, no. 3 (Autumn 1947): 333.

⁸ 'Report on Middle-Class Attitudes to Russians and Americans,' File Report 3015, July 1948, Mass-Observation Archive, The Keep, Brighton, West Sussex (hereafter 'MOA').

the left and right who accused the organisation of lacking impartiality. Such criticism suggests that observers were, for all their political preferences, still relatively close to the centre of public opinion.⁹

Second, Mass-Observation does not provide comprehensive chronological coverage. The project originally ran between 1937 and 1949, eventually being revived in 1981. As a result, the archive imparts little information on such pivotal events in the history of Anglo-American relations as the Suez crisis, the confrontation over the Skybolt ballistic missile and the Vietnam War. Although participants in the reanimated Mass-Observation of the 1980s discuss some of these events, their opinions are open to criticism of the omissions and distortions caused by the passing of time. Conversely, observers' reflections on events that occurred decades earlier afford insight into the enduring relevance, meaning and symbolism of Anglo-American relations beyond immediate contemporary opinion. Comparison of the data from the decades covered by both eras of Mass-Observation also allows for an assessment of continuity and changes in British attitudes towards the United States from the opening salvos of the Second World War to the final phase of the Cold War.

A third matter is that Mass-Observation was less concerned with the recording of objective reality than the subjective response of participants to the events impacting their lives. As the organisation early on remarked of its volunteers, 'They tell us not what society is like, but what it looks like to them.' By inviting participants to discuss not only their intellectually reasoned but also emotionally conditioned responses to the United States, Mass-Observation illuminates the 'structures of meaning' described by Akira Iriye. Its surveys encouraged participants to use their hearts as well as their heads in offering their opinions of

⁹ Nick Hubble, *Mass-Observation and Everyday Life: Culture, History, Theory* (Houndmills, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 142.

American people and politics, allowing us to see the level to which the British public shared the sentimental attachment to a common ancestry, language and culture that Winston Churchill articulated in his Fulton speech.

Mass-Observation and the Second World War

Despite the wartime alliance between Britain and the United States, Mass-Observation reveals considerable mistrust in and dislike of Americans on the part of the British public. It took more than two years from the outbreak of the war in September 1939 for the United States to intervene, a situation that elicited an angry and embittered response from many Mass-Observers.¹⁰ A survey of October 1940 found that only 27% of respondents had a favourable attitude towards the United States. The introduction of Lend-Lease in March 1941 improved opinion but polling by Mass-Observation the following month disclosed that still only 60% of participants regarded the United States positively. Some also complained about the quality of the tinned food imported from the other side of the Atlantic.¹¹ Resentment towards the United States even led some respondents to wish for a military attack on the country that would shake it from its complacent isolationism. In the words of one observer, 'A few good bombs on the guts of them will do all the good in the world.'¹² When the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor in December 1941 it may therefore have satisfied some observers, but others found their already meagre faith in the United States further diminished by its having been 'caught napping'.¹³

¹⁰ 'Mutual Anglo-American Feelings,' File Report 1656, April 1, 1943, 2, 5-7, MOA.

¹¹ 'American Tinned Foods,' File Report 999, December 15, 1941, MOA.

¹² H. D. Willcock, File Report 2548, 3.

¹³ 'Report on Feelings about America and the Americans,' File Report 1569, January 22, 1943, MOA, 6.

Historians have extensively documented the American military presence in Britain from January 1942.¹⁴ Mass-Observation further illuminates our understanding of the often intimate but also fractious encounter between US soldiers and British civilians. Wartime polling by the organisation about public attitudes towards nine different nationalities revealed that respondents had, with the exception of Poles, the least unconditionally affirmative attitude towards Americans. Positive opinions of Americans did increase between 1941 and 1943 from 27 to 33%. That figure nonetheless compared unfavourably with the approval ratings of other foreigners, which in 1943 stood at 73% for the Dutch, 64% for the Czechs, 52% for the French and 43% for Greeks. Respondents even preferred enemy Italians, with a positive rating of 41%, to their American allies.¹⁵ This adverse attitude had more to do with the persistence of stereotypes than it did with personal experience. According to a Mass-Observation file report of January 1943, opinion of Americans was least favourable in those communities where few people had actually come across US soldiers. Conversely, it was in towns and cities where American troops were most concentrated, such as Cheltenham and Bristol, that respondents were most well disposed towards them.¹⁶

This warmer welcome extended to African American soldiers. In contrast to white GIs who many Britons considered overbearing, black troops earned respect for their personal

¹⁴ Norman Longmate, *The GI's: The Americans in Britain, 1942-1945* (London: Hutchinson, 1975); Juliet Gardiner, *Over Here: The GIs in Wartime Britain* (London: Collins & Brown, 1992); David Reynolds, *Rich Relations: The American Occupation of Britain, 1942-1945* (London: HarperCollins, 1995); Niall Barr, *Yanks and Limeys: Alliance Warfare in the Second World War* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2015).

¹⁵ 'A Study of Subjective Feeling About Various Racial Groups,' File Report 541, January 9, 1941; 'Attitudes to Foreigners,' File Report 1669, April 1943, MOA. See also 'Attitudes to Americans and Russians,' File Report 2548, December 4, 1947, 1, MOA.

¹⁶ 'Report on Feelings About America and the Americans,' File Report 1569, January 22, 1943, 14, MOA.

modesty. Racial discrimination within the ranks of the US Army nonetheless received relatively little criticism. Fewer than half of the people polled by Mass-Observation in January 1943 considered American racial practices unacceptable, 45% of men and 34% of women. Moreover, when the researchers separated the opinions of those with or without a particular expression of interest in the issue, they discovered that the former were *more* supportive of Jim Crow policies, 24% compared to 12%.¹⁷ What is more, while some of those who disapproved of US racism did so out of moral conviction, others wanted more to retaliate against pious American criticism of British imperialism. According to one respondent whose language divulged a less than enlightened attitude, the Americans might have a point about colonialism but ‘the way they treat the niggers isn’t anything to be proud of, either.’¹⁸ Evidently the presence of thousands of black servicemen did not have a damascene impact on the racial attitudes of many white Britons.

On one aspect of the United States, however, Mass-Observers had no ambivalence: its wartime leader, Franklin Delano Roosevelt. The president commanded the admiration of many respondents even before the United States came to the aid of Britain against Axis forces. A June 1939 directive asked participants to list in order of preference ten world leaders. Roosevelt consistently appeared at or near the top of replies.¹⁹ His fireside chats are legendary for the reassurance they offered a troubled American public during the Great Depression. But his patrician tones also resonated on the other side of the Atlantic. As one

¹⁷ ‘Report on Feelings About America and the Americans,’ File Report 1569, January 22, 1943, 32-33, MOA.

¹⁸ ‘Mutual Anglo-American Feelings’, April 1, 1943, 10-11.

¹⁹ Directive: ‘Race,’ June 1939, MOA. The ten leaders were Beck, Chamberlain, Chiang Kai-shek, Daladier, De Valera, Goering, Hitler, Mussolini, Roosevelt and Stalin. Mass-Observation did not tabulate the results.

observer, who dismissed almost all of the other politicians on the list as ‘also-rans’, put it: ‘I have always felt that he and I were old friends.’²⁰

The esteem in which Roosevelt was held became even more fervent because of the fortitude he demonstrated in overcoming pervasive isolationist opposition and leading his country into war. According to one wartime file report, ‘The American people are sometimes looked on as a naïve child with a wise father-leader.’²¹ Respondents celebrated Roosevelt’s defeat of Wendell Willkie in the presidential election of November 1940 as assurance that the United States would come to the support of a Britain already severely strained by the fight against Nazi Germany.²² Events in 1941 affirmed the British public’s hope in the president, first in March the introduction of Lend-Lease, then in August the outlining by Roosevelt and Churchill of Allied war aims in the Atlantic Charter, and finally in December US military action following the bombing of Pearl Harbor.²³

Roosevelt maintained high levels of popularity among Mass Observers throughout the war. Surveys conducted in 1943 and 1944 returned approval ratings of 79% and 76% respectively. Only 5% of respondents to either survey had a negative perception of the president.²⁴ When Mass-Observation asked provocatively which of the three main Allied leaders’ deaths they would be most able to accept, Roosevelt came a distant third behind

²⁰ D43, reply to ‘Race’ directive, June 1939, MOA.

²¹ ‘Attitudes to Foreigners,’ File Report 1669, April 1943, 8, MOA.

²² H. D. Wilcock, File Report 2548, 8, MOA.

²³ ‘Mutual Anglo-American Feelings,’ File Report 1656, April 1, 1943, MOA.

²⁴ ‘Anti-Americanism,’ File Report 2454, January 26, 1947, n.p.; ‘Report on Feelings about America and the Americans,’ File Report 1569, January 22, 1943, 15, MOA.

Stalin and Churchill.²⁵ The president's physical frailties made the strength of his moral and political leadership all the more potent to many Mass-Observation participants. 'Oh, well, I do like him,' asserted a female volunteer from Portsmouth, 'because he's an invalid to start with, and to do what he does as an invalid is very plucky!'²⁶ Although mistaken about the president's age when he contracted polio, a male participant from York similarly declared, 'It's no mean thing to overcome infantile paralysis and lead an unwilling nation into war at the same time.'²⁷

The tenderness as well as respect with which respondents held the president accounts for their intense sense of personal loss following his sudden death in April 1945, feelings made all the more acute by the fact that he would not witness the victory he had done so much to engineer. Mass-Observation conducted a survey of volunteers' reactions that revealed their depth of feeling. 'All the people I've talked to today seem to be genuinely sorry about his death,' replied one contributor. 'All classes.'²⁸ Another disclosed the intimacy of their affection for Roosevelt. 'It made me feel all numb all over, as if someone in my own family had died.'²⁹ A further respondent recalled her husband trying to calm her when she heard the news by saying that at least it was not Churchill who had died. 'I liked Roosevelt better,' she retorted, 'he was a man of the people, Churchill's an old Trollope, only out for his own class.'³⁰ That response hints at an admiration for the president that predated the war. At a

²⁵ H. D. Willcock, untitled, File Report 2548, 7-8, MOA.

²⁶ 'Report on Feelings about America and the Americans', File Report 1569, January 22, 1943, 16, MOA.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ 'Death of Roosevelt,' File Report 2229, April 13, 1945, 2, MOA.

²⁹ 'Death of Roosevelt,' File Report 2229, April 13, 1945, 1, MOA.

³⁰ Ibid.

time when British voters were on the verge of electing a Labour government that would enact a new welfare state, Roosevelt's New Deal had a powerful transatlantic resonance underappreciated by historians. The testimonies of Mass-Observation respondents provide individual voice to the collective mourning shown by Britons on the news of Roosevelt's death, with streets in London fallen silent, lights dimmed in the West End theatre district, and passengers weeping openly on underground trains. This public manifestation of personal grief may suggest an emotional character to the Anglo-American relationship far beyond the political interaction of elite politicians.³¹

From World War to Cold War

The reverence with which Mass-Observation volunteers regarded Roosevelt also led in the months following the end of the war – when tensions arose between Britain and the United States – to their constructing counternarratives of the stronger transatlantic ties that would have been possible under his leadership. Participants were distinctly unimpressed with the man who assumed the presidency in April 1945, former vice-president Harry S. Truman. The new president's decision to terminate Lend-Lease and what many perceived as the exploitative terms of the post-war financial loan to Britain aroused particularly bitter comment. 'Be different if only old Roosevelt had lived,' lamented one participant, 'he was a real friend to us.'³² According to another, 'America has treated us very badly indeed – it's a shame. I think it would have been very different if Roosevelt had lived.'³³ While some

³¹ Lynne Olson, *Citizens of London: The Americans Who Stood with Britain In Its Darkest, Finest Hour* (New York: Random House, 2010), 357-58.

³² 'Miscellaneous Questions,' File Report 2281, September 3, 1945, 4.

³³ H. D. Willcock File Report 2548, n.d., 7, MOA.

participants recognised how a reactionary Congress and resurgence of public isolationism constrained Truman, others believed that Roosevelt would have overcome such political obstacles. Their conclusion, in the words of one volunteer, was that ‘Truman is not the man to England that Roosevelt was.’³⁴ Moreover, many perceived the new president as being responsible for the escalation of diplomatic hostilities between the United States and Soviet Union that endangered the entire world. Asked in a directive of November 1948 to identify ‘Good Men and Bad Men’, respondents ranked Truman third behind Stalin and Molotov in the latter category. The president failed to make the former list. Tellingly, some respondents stated that they would have named Roosevelt were he still alive.³⁵ This animosity towards Truman also led several Mass-Observation diarists to express their hope that he would lose the 1948 presidential election – and their disappointment when he defied the odds to win victory.³⁶

Historians recognise the importance of historical contingency in the emergence of the post-war special relationship. There was serious friction between Washington and London over a wide range of issues, including the financial loan, atomic energy, the speed and scale of British decolonisation, the resettlement of Jewish refugees in Palestine, and diplomatic recognition of the People’s Republic of China. Only with the heightening of Cold War tensions between the forces of East and West did the Anglo-American alliance take form.

The Mass-Observation archive reveals that the disagreements and misunderstandings at the level of high politics were reflected in the sentiments of a British public ambivalent about a transatlantic partnership with the United States. According to then head of Mass-

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ ‘Good Men and Bad Men’, File Report 3058, November 1948, MOA.

³⁶ Diarist 5472, June 24, 1948, MOA.

Observation, H. D. Willcock, there was a ‘negative and disturbing’ change in public opinion towards Americans in the months immediately following the end of the war.³⁷ A file report on anti-Americanism produced by his office in January 1947 revealed that during the war favourable attitudes towards the people of the United States had remained relatively consistent, although only attaining majority opinion during the victory celebrations of 1945. By March 1946, that figure had collapsed from 58% to 21%, a record low that remained unchanged throughout the rest of the year.³⁸

The causes of this precipitous collapse were many but chief among them was the cessation of Lend Lease and the interest rates imposed by the United States on its financial loan to Britain. Many Britons believed that their country was entitled to better terms as a mark of gratitude for the sacrifices made in fighting the first two years of the war without US support. As H. D. Willcock suggested, Mass-Observation participants’ belief that the Americans ‘ought to behave with proper respect towards us’ led to ‘a quick and ready resentment if they don’t.’³⁹ A young working class respondent put it more bluntly. ‘They’re a lot of greedy buggers. They won’t help unless they can get a lot out of it.’⁴⁰ Further fuelling this animus towards the United States was a conviction shared by both Labour and Conservative respondents, not without substance, that politicians in Washington were reluctant to provide financial support for the nationalisation agenda of the Attlee

³⁷ H. D. Willcock, File Report 2548, December 14, 1947, 2, MOA.

³⁸ ‘Anti-Americanism,’ File Report 2454, January 26, 1947, MOA.

³⁹ H. D. Willcock, File Report 2548, December 14, 1947, 10, MOA.

⁴⁰ H. D. Willcock, File Report 2548, December 14, 1947, 5, MOA.

administration. 'I reckon it's our socialist government has made the Americans do this,' exclaimed one participant. 'They don't like it and they'll smash it if they can.'⁴¹

Suspicion of the United States also caused deep scepticism on the part of Mass-Observation respondents about the motivations for the Marshall Plan. This was even though Britain was the principal beneficiary of the Economic Recovery Program, receiving \$3.2 billion of the total \$12.6 billion.⁴² A file report produced in April 1948 concluded that there was widespread cynicism that the Marshall plan was a Trojan horse, the United States 'backing help to Europe solely for her own ends and to expand her markets'.⁴³ As one respondent, identified as a male manufacturing chemist, asserted: 'The U.S. is a powerful creditor nation with territory-grabbing designs; using their vast financial, commodity and manufacturing resources as a means to an end, and that end is an extremely selfish one.'⁴⁴

Two observations of these criticisms of the United States merit attention. The first is that Mass-Observation was consistent with numerous sources, including media correspondents and government officials on both sides of the Atlantic, in perceiving a sharp rise in British anti-Americanism immediately after the war. According to *Newsweek's* London bureau chief Fred Vanderschmidt, 'one out of three Englishmen were more or less antagonistic to anything that came from America, from Buicks to businessmen' and another

⁴¹ 'Miscellaneous Questions,' File Report 2281, September 3, 1945, 4. See also H. D. Willcock, File Report 2548, December 14, 1947, 6, MOA.

⁴² Christopher Grayling and Christopher Langdon, *Just Another Star? Anglo-American Relations since 1945* (London: Harrap, 1988), 6.

⁴³ 'Note on Marshall Aid,' File Report 2586, April 16, 1948, MOA.

⁴⁴ 'Report on Middle-Class Attitudes to Russians and Americans,' File Report 3015, 8, MOA.

third ‘couldn’t care less’.⁴⁵ Second, the sharp rise in criticism of the United States was attributable to people favourably disposed towards the country but nonetheless opposed to specific policies enacted in Washington as well as those who harboured a deeper ideological animus towards all things American. Some Mass-Observation participants were undoubtedly anti-American, perceiving US foreign policy as the product of an innately corrupt political culture. The rise of US hegemony therefore posed an existential threat to Britain, which was at risk of becoming a vassal state. Such was the opinion of one volunteer in spring 1945: ‘Seeing their individual arrogance, Teutonic massiveness, and lack of courtesy and common decency, one is not surprised that as a nation they have immense supplies of food, do not intend supplying us so freely, and probably believe that they are winning the war as well and are prepared to flood the world with their atrocious films, full of slop, bad manners, inaccurate history and the general marvelousness of the American people’.⁴⁶ The fact that opinion of the United States rose and fell in accordance with the introduction of measures deemed beneficial or detrimental to British interests nonetheless suggests the need for caution in applying the term ‘anti-American’ to transitory criticism of specific politicians or policies.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Fred Vanderschmidt, *What the English Think of Us* (New York: Robert M. McBride, 1948), 2. See also Ross N. Berkes, ‘The Anglo-American Alliance,’ *Current History* 46 (May 1, 1964): 275. See also Caroline Anstey, ‘The Projection of British Socialism: Foreign Office Publicity and American Opinion, 1945-50,’ *Journal of Contemporary History* 19, no. 3 (July 1984): 442.

⁴⁶ ‘Anti-Americanism,’ File Report 2454, 26 January 1947, MOA. See also the concerns about the post-war future expressed by M40D in ‘Report on Feelings about America and the Americans,’ File Report 1569, 22 January 1943, 44, MOA.

⁴⁷ My interpretation of what constitutes ‘anti-Americanism’ owes much to Richard Kuisel, *Seducing the French: The Dilemma of Americanization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 6-10.

For all this censure of the United States, the onset of the Cold War in the late 1940s resuscitated the ailing Anglo-American alliance. There were nonetheless persistent tensions within the partnership. Mass-Observation exposed some of these strains in a survey of public opinion on the Korean War conducted in June and July 1950. Residual respect for the Soviet Union as a former wartime ally had by that time receded as a result of its numerous acts of aggression including the Czech coup of February 1948 and, four months later, the start of the Berlin Blockade. Soviet belligerence led many observers who had once believed that Britain could act as a ‘third force’ between the competing superpowers to come down firmly on the side of the United States. There were still some who took an entrenched ideological position against the Americans, damning them as ‘the war mongers of the world’.⁴⁸ Others censured the United States for not having done more to accommodate the Soviet Union, particularly by attempting to monopolise atomic power, which they saw as having contributed to the Korean situation. ‘I think America’s doing the right thing in putting a stop to Russia’s expansionist policy,’ affirmed one respondent. However, ‘I can’t help feeling that America herself – by refusing to let Russia have the secrets of the Atom Bomb has herself aroused suspicion in the 1st place.’⁴⁹ Notwithstanding some unease at another military conflict so soon after the end of the war, most observers still supported US intervention. As one participant asserted: ‘I think America’s acting rightly. If we don’t stop it, Russia will swamp the world’.⁵⁰

That inclusive use of ‘we’ hinted at the prospect of British military support. For Clement Attlee’s Labour government, this was an expedient course of action to ensure a continued US contribution to Western European defence. To some respondents drawing on

⁴⁸ M60D, reply to ‘Public Opinions of the Korean War, June-July 1950,’ Topic Collection, MOA.

⁴⁹ M35C, reply to ‘Public Opinions of the Korean War, June-July 1950,’ Topic Collection, MOA.

⁵⁰ M55C reply to ‘Public Opinions of the Korean War, June-July 1950,’ Topic Collection, MOA. See, among others, the replies of M40C, F29D and M30C.

their experience of having served alongside Americans during the Second World War it was also necessary for the British to provide strategic leadership.⁵¹ This presumption that American brawn needed the guidance of British brains reveals the pervasiveness of a belief most familiarly associated with Harold Macmillan that ‘These Americans represent the new Roman empire and we Britons, like the Greeks of old, must teach them how to make it go.’⁵²

The cessation of Mass-Observation unfortunately means that there were no further surveys that would disclose shifts in public opinion as the Korean War persisted for three years without the prospect of military victory. The data drawn from the early days of the Korean conflict nonetheless demonstrate an alignment of British public opinion with the United States in the global struggle to contain communist expansion. As the surveys conducted by Mass Observation between 1945 and 1950 show, while there was not necessarily a risk of permanent separation, the reconciliation process that brought the transatlantic partners back together was both long and difficult.

A New Focus to Old Prejudices

Mass-Observation was dormant from the early 1950s until its resuscitation three decades later. Scholars are therefore dependent on other sources to determine the ways in which British popular opinion about the United States ebbed and flowed during the intervening years. The revival of Mass-Observation nonetheless afforded fresh insight into public

⁵¹ M50B, M58B, replies to ‘Public Opinions of the Korean War, June-July 1950,’ Topic Collection, MOA.

⁵² John Baylis, ed. *Anglo-American Relations Since 1939: The Enduring Alliance* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997), 12

attitudes towards a diplomatic partnership that had endured through a succession of internal and external crises.

In 1984 Mass Observation ran the survey 'Attitudes to USA' which consisted of a series of questions that invited extended responses from several hundred participants. The results amounted to a damning indictment of the administration of Ronald Reagan specifically and of the United States more broadly. Scholars have usually seen the 1980s as a decade when the close personal and political partnership between Reagan and British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher rewove the fraying transatlantic ties between the United States and Britain. More recent revisionist analyses have shown that while the two politicians shared similar ideologies, they interacted on policy less often than is commonly understood.⁵³ While such studies have done much to demythologise Anglo-American relations during these years, their focus has still been on high politics. What the Mass-Observation data suggest is that regardless of how special the relationship Thatcher had with Reagan really was, it had little foundation in the sentiment of the nation she supposedly represented.

'There is no special relationship,' asserted a female respondent whose words speak for almost everyone who offered an opinion on the subject.⁵⁴ It was, according to other participants, 'a polite fiction', 'a myth', 'a political fantasy', and 'a joke – in bad taste'.⁵⁵ The accusation that the United States promoted its alliance with Britain only when it was in its own national interest to do so, which had been levelled by participants immediately after the Second World War, had gained even greater force four decades later. Other than a common

⁵³ James Cooper, *Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan: A Very Political Special Relationship* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

⁵⁴ P438, reply to 'Attitude to USA' survey, 1984, MOA.

⁵⁵ O1018, A1323, A008, L227, replies to 'Attitude to USA' survey, 1984, MOA.

language, respondents offered no suggestion of any shared transatlantic identity. Again and again those who answered the survey emphasised the fundamentally contingent nature of their country's relationship with the United States. 'This special relationship you refer to,' avowed another female participant, 'is, I think, special, one way only, that is as long as the Yanks can have their own way.'⁵⁶

Significantly, among the minority of respondents who considered that there was still an alliance between Britain and the United States several contended that it had been to the detriment of their own country. 'Regrettably Britain does share a special relationship with America,' remarked one participant, 'and unwisely, I feel, we let them use us as a part of their frontline in the cold-war against the Soviet Union'.⁵⁷ For such contributors to the survey, Britain had ceded its national sovereignty to the United States. Margaret Thatcher might proclaim herself the 'Iron Lady' but in the hands of Reagan she seemed to be made of an altogether more pliable element. 'Time after time over the years,' lamented one volunteer, 'I have been appalled as successive British prime ministers have supported wars, bombings, defoliation, destabilisation without protest when strong words from Great Britain might have been effective.'⁵⁸ In light of the 2016 Brexit referendum it is notable how many respondents in 1984 were of the opinion that Britain would be better to align itself more closely with Western Europe.⁵⁹

'Attitudes to USA' exposed a particularly personal dislike of the American president. Women especially were scathing of Reagan, perceiving him as an actor who was playing a

⁵⁶ L318, reply to 'Attitude to USA' survey, 1984, MOA.

⁵⁷ B970 reply to 'Attitude to USA' survey, 1984, MOA.

⁵⁸ D996 reply to 'Attitude to USA' survey, 1984, MOA.

⁵⁹ See, for example, A008 and A015 replies to 'Attitude to USA' survey, 1984, MOA.

part for which he was badly miscast. ‘Pathetic is the only word which impinges,’ proclaimed one woman. ‘For God’s sake if they had to make a movie actor president, could it not have been an “A” one of the calibre of a Gregory Peck(!) or at least a *good* “B” instead of a ham.’⁶⁰ Reagan’s election also reflected poorly on the United States more broadly. According to another female participant, ‘There must be something wrong with their system when a man as ignorant as Ronald Reagan gets to the highest office in the land.’⁶¹ The president’s politics met with even more rebuke than his personality. His administration’s interventions against democratically elected governments in Latin America and the Caribbean provoked pervasive criticism. A female participant from Coventry used an American colloquialism to emphasise how she had always regarded the United States as the “Bees Knees”. That was until the US intervention in Grenada in October 1983. The invasion of a British Commonwealth member over the objections of Downing Street demonstrated to the respondent that the Reagan administration had broken the vows of the special relationship. Now she saw Americans for what they really were, ‘dreadful people – probably more to be feared than the Russians’.⁶² Reagan’s aggressive stance towards the Soviet Union also induced widespread anxiety among respondents that he might precipitate a nuclear war. Many survey participants were also believed that the president’s only interest in Britain was its strategic use as a launch site for US cruise missiles, a situation that placed their country in the frontline for a retaliatory strike by the Soviets. In language that evoked the anxieties of Mass-Observation participants during the onset of the Cold War four decades earlier, respondents repeatedly worried that the United States would precipitate a nuclear conflict for which Britain would suffer the consequences. ‘I am afraid of the “finger on the button” talk of President Reagan,’ exclaimed

⁶⁰ H675 reply to ‘Attitude to USA’ survey, 1984, MOA.

⁶¹ M386 reply to ‘Attitude to USA’ survey, 1984, MOA.

⁶² H1265 reply to ‘Attitude to USA’ survey, 1984, MOA.

one female respondent.⁶³ To which another woman who answered the survey added, ‘I very much fear that unless some effort is made soon to come to an understanding between East and West that the U.S.A. will succeed in destroying not only Europe and Russia but the whole world.’⁶⁴

The principal methodological criticism of the ‘Attitudes to USA’ survey is that it represents only a snapshot of a moment in time. Not any moment of time, either, but a point at which the ‘bitter humiliation’ of the British government over the US invasion of Grenada still stung deep.⁶⁵ The absence of any later survey means, for example, that we do not know whether the collapse of the Soviet Union resulted in any retrospective reappraisal of Reagan’s Cold War policies. Yet the consistency with which participants, cutting across differences in age, gender, class and political affiliation, expressed their opinions is telling.

None of the criticisms levelled by Mass Observers means that the British and American governments did not continue to share an unusually close collaboration. However, it does imply that the ‘special relationship’ was in essence an elite phenomenon without deep grassroots support. As one female volunteer remarked: ‘Somehow, I do not think there is a special “relationship” between this Country and the United States, other than a common language. I am sure that the powers-that-be would like to think it and would like the rank-and-file to think that a special relationship exists but I have a feeling that it is all “top show”.’⁶⁶ Such opinions are consistent with the later conclusions of political scientists Jorgen Rasmussen and James McCormick that the concept of the ‘special relationship’ had little

⁶³ B1261 reply to ‘Attitude to USA’ survey, 1984, MOA.

⁶⁴ B044. reply to ‘Attitude to USA’ survey, 1984, MOA.

⁶⁵ David Dimbleby and David Reynolds, *An Ocean Apart: The Relationship Between Britain and America in the Twentieth Century* (London: BBC/ Hodder & Stoughton, 1988).

⁶⁶ A1190. reply to ‘Attitude to USA’ survey, 1984, MOA.

currency among the British public. Their research had revealed no ‘set of stable fundamental values and dispositions upon which the British might base assessments of and orientations to the United States that would differ intrinsically from those they held toward any other country.’ The ‘Attitude to USA’ survey further corroborates their claim that the ties between the British and American governments could have an adverse effect on public opinion of a prime minister.⁶⁷ While Rasmussen and McCormick conducted research on contemporary attitudes in the 1990s, Mass-Observation provides important chronological depth to their depiction of a British public that had no emotional or intellectual investment in the ‘special relationship’. In that respect, the archive provides an opposing perspective to the claim made by Steve Marsh in his contribution to this special issue about enduring support among the British public for their country’s ‘special relationship’ with the United States.

The Persistence of Stereotypes

Not every volunteer who derided the Reagan administration was hostile to the United States per se. As James Cronin argues elsewhere in this special issue, disapproval of specific politicians and policies did not necessarily constitute anti-Americanism. ‘Attitudes to USA’ nonetheless showed the persistence of negative stereotypes of the American people and their political culture. Removed from their chronological context, it would be difficult to determine whether opinions expressed about the United States came from 1984 or 1948.

When Mass-Observation asked volunteers to characterise Americans in the 1940s many praised what they perceived as a greater energy and innovation than the British

⁶⁷ Jorgen Rasmussen and James M. McCormick, ‘British Mass Perceptions of the Anglo-American Special Relationship,’ *Political Science Quarterly* 108, no. 3 (1993): 539, 540.

possessed. However, respondents also saw Americans as arrogant, uncultured and ruthlessly acquisitive. Asked to identify Americans' most negative personality traits in a 1942 survey, 47% of respondents considered them boastful, 7% focused on their materialism and 10% chose comprehensively answered 'everything'. A further survey the following year found that the presence of US troops in Britain had affected public attitudes, the percentage who criticised Americans' boastfulness having decreased to 27%. Yet the share of respondents who loathed everything about Americans actually increased to 14%.

Forty years later the same stereotypes of Americans still held purchase on the imagination of the British public. It was not only what people thought of Americans that remained similar but also *how* they reached their opinions. Scholars have assumed that the advent of cheaper transatlantic travel provided ordinary Britons with an opportunity unaffordable to earlier generations to gain personal experience of the United States. Long gone by the 1980s were the days when Alex Atkinson and Ronald Searle could produce their satirical travelogue *USA for Beginners*, published in 1959, in which they boasted that they had never actually set foot in the country.⁶⁸ Yet one conspicuous aspect of the 1984 survey is how few of the respondents had travelled to the nation about which they were invited to comment. Instead their opinions were primarily formed, as was true of respondents four decades earlier, by their voracious consumption of American popular culture, especially cinema, and by British media coverage.

The endurance of popular stereotypes about Americans is therefore not entirely surprising. Mass-Observation did not conduct a statistical analysis of opinions about the United States that would provide comparison with the 1940s. Qualitative data nonetheless

⁶⁸ Alex Atkinson and Ronald Searle, *USA for Beginners: By Rocking Chair across America* (London: Peperdua Books, 1959).

showed that the American of the British imagination was much the same as he or she (and the typically gendered characterisation of Americans was of males rather than females) had been four decades earlier. Respondents praised Americans for the confidence, energy and innovation that made their country more productive and dynamic than their own. In contrast to Britain's class-bound culture, participants saw the United States as more socially mobile and the American people as exhibiting greater friendliness and candour. Yet they also criticised what they regarded as Americans' materialism, parochialism, arrogance and excessive religiosity. Participants also condemned American society for what they perceived as its violence and racism. On some occasions this censure assumed the form of a sweeping anti-Americanism. As one woman from Bradford-on-Avon haughtily wrote: 'Since the war I can think of nothing we have imported from America, material or otherwise that has improved the quality of life here.'⁶⁹

Although most respondents had not travelled to the United States, many had encountered American tourists who came to Britain – and left a less than positive impression. 'The words "American tourist," declared one female contributor, 'to me conjure up a picture of a plump, red faced American with a loud voice, throwing his weight around.'⁷⁰ A woman from London was even more dismissive. Americans, she concluded, were 'fine in small doses. I find their voices & table manners very tiresome & intrusive especially where they all sample each other's food. A trough one feels would be more suitable.'⁷¹ As this last comment intimated, while many respondents conceded their enthusiasm for American popular culture, the imports to which they strenuously objected were words and phrases that infiltrated the English language. Rare among the respondents was the woman who rather cheekily mused

⁶⁹ B1210, reply to 'Attitude to USA' survey, 1984, MOA.

⁷⁰ B077, reply to 'Attitude to USA' survey, 1984, MOA.

⁷¹ B653, reply to 'Attitude to USA' survey, 1984, MOA.

that, ‘I don’t mind American terms. Frankly, my dear, I don’t give a damn.’⁷² Instead, participants complained of the ‘mutilation’ and ‘murder’ of their native tongue. As the woman from London stressed, it was not only what Americans said that caused upset but also the way that they said it, which was very loudly.⁷³

Mass-Observation: Window or Mirror?

Mass-Observation provides arguably the most thorough qualitative and quantitative data available on British public opinion towards the United States during the twentieth century. The archive both confirms and confounds the assertion of historian Dominic Sandbrook that, ‘For all the fuss about the special relationship, or banning the bomb, or Skybolt, or nuclear testing, or the madness of modern science, it ultimately turned out that to most people there were a lot of better things to worry about.’⁷⁴ There were indeed some Mass-Observation respondents, particularly women, who admitted to having no considered opinion of the United States. As one female volunteer commented of the ‘Attitudes to USA’ survey: ‘When considering this directive, I came to the conclusion that I do not really give a great deal of

⁷² C101, reply to ‘Attitude to USA’ survey, 1984, MOA.

⁷³ D157, B955. reply to ‘Attitude to USA’ survey, 1984, MOA

⁷⁴ Dominic Sandbrook, *Never Had It So Good: A History of Britain from Suez to the Beatles* (London: Abacus, 2006), 259. See also Lawrence Black, “‘The Bitterest Enemies of Communism’: Labour Revisionists, Atlanticism and the Cold War,’ *Contemporary British History* 15, no. 3 (Autumn 2001): 54. spacing

thought to America at all.’⁷⁵ However partial or uninformed, many volunteers did nevertheless possess strong views about the United States. There remains the issue of how representative participants were of the broader public, Mass-Observation having attracted those with the necessary time and inclination to commit their thoughts to paper. These limitations aside, the archive offers a rich abundance of insight into British perceptions of the United States over the course of half a century.

A broader criticism of Mass-Observation is that it reveals as much, if not, more about the British than it does about Americans. According to a recent satirical book, ‘Basically, the British think the Americans would be greatly improved by being more British.’⁷⁶ Mass-Observation attests to the accuracy of this assessment. In an evaluation of ‘Mutual Anglo-American Feelings’ conducted in 1943, researchers concluded that the linguistic and cultural commonalities between Britons and Americans caused the former to hold the latter to a higher standard, essentially an idealised sense of themselves, than other foreign peoples. ‘Just as, in families, relations are often judged more critically than strangers,’ asserted the author of the report, ‘so the Americans have to a large extent been measured against what may be called a standard of British behaviour, whereas other nations have been judged against a standard of foreign behaviour, which, rightly or wrongly, is far less exacting.’ The actual and apparent similarities between Britons and Americans therefore made the differences all the more aggravating. It also raised expectations of American diplomatic, military and economic support that induced bitter disappointment and anger when it was not forthcoming on the terms that Britons anticipated.

⁷⁵ M865, reply to ‘Attitude to USA’ survey, 1984, MOA.

⁷⁶ Boris Starling, *Haynes Explains The British* (Sparkford, Yeovil: Haynes, 2017), 9.

In an unusually insightful response to the 1984 survey, a woman whose daughter worked for a tourist company that catered to American tourists drew on this second-hand experience to describe this clientele as loud, rude, and over-privileged, before pausing to reflect that this ‘might be considered to be a pretty fair description of the Englishman abroad.’ ‘I remember once learning in Psychology,’ she continued, ‘that the more we criticise and show our resentment towards others, the more it reveals of our own anxiety about ourselves.’⁷⁷ When respondents compared the aggressiveness of US foreign policy with the subtler arts of British statecraft or what one woman described as the ‘mass-hysteria’ of Americans with the ‘quiet pride and reserve’ of her own nation, the measure of judgement was less objective reality than a romanticised image of themselves.⁷⁸ Yet the subjectivity of participant responses is a strength as much as a weakness since it provides an insight into the felt response of ordinary Britons to the decline of their own nation and increasingly interdependent relationship with the United States. As what the historian Claire Langhamer labels ‘an archive of feeling’, Mass-Observation therefore provides one of the most important means by which to reconstruct the emotional history of Anglo-American relations.⁷⁹

⁷⁷ B1120, reply to ‘Attitude to USA’ survey, 1984, MOA.

⁷⁸ C134, reply to ‘Attitude to USA’ survey, 1984, MOA.

⁷⁹ Claire Langhamer, ‘An archive of feeling? Mass Observation and the Mid-Century Moment,’ *Insights*, 9 (2016).

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